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Targeting Adipose Tissue Inflammation in Obesity and Diabetes: The Anti-Inflammatory Potential of Plant Extracts

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ABSTRACT

Obesity and type 2 diabetes are global health challenges that often coexist, both characterized by chronic low-grade inflammation, particularly in adipose tissue. This inflammation plays a pivotal role in the pathogenesis of insulin resistance and impaired metabolic function. Recent research has highlighted the therapeutic potential of plant-derived bioactive compounds in attenuating adipose tissue inflammation, providing a promising natural approach to managing obesity-related metabolic disturbances. This review aims to explore the mechanisms underlying adipose tissue inflammation in obesity and diabetes and discuss the potential of various plant extracts in reducing this inflammation. We focus on plant bioactive such as polyphenols, flavonoids, alkaloids, terpenoids, and carotenoids, which have been shown to modulate key inflammatory pathways, enhance insulin sensitivity, and improve metabolic health. The molecular mechanisms of action of these bioactive in regulating adipokines, pro-inflammatory cytokines, and macrophage polarization within adipose tissue are critically examined. Furthermore, we discuss the challenges and future directions in the clinical application of plant-based anti-inflammatory therapies in obesity and diabetes management.

Keywords: Adipose tissue inflammation, obesity, diabetes, insulin resistance, plant extracts, bioactive compounds, chronic inflammation, adipokines.

INTRODUCTION

Obesity and type 2 diabetes (T2D) are prevalent metabolic disorders that are intricately linked to insulin resistance, a condition in which the body's cells become less responsive to insulin[1–4]. This resistance to insulin impedes the proper uptake of glucose from the bloodstream, leading to elevated blood glucose levels, which are characteristic of T2D[5–7]. A central feature of insulin resistance is chronic inflammation, particularly within adipose tissue. Traditionally, adipose tissue has been viewed simply as a storage depot for fat. However, recent research has revealed that adipose tissue is an active endocrine organ that plays a crucial role in regulating metabolism and inflammation. In obesity, excess fat accumulation leads to changes in adipose tissue composition, resulting in the infiltration of immune cells, such as macrophages, into the tissue[8–10]. These immune cells play a pivotal role in the inflammatory process by secreting pro-inflammatory cytokines, including tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and interleukin-1 beta (IL-1β)[3]. These cytokines not only contribute to local inflammation within adipose tissue but also lead to systemic inflammation, which disrupts insulin signaling and promotes insulin resistance.

The inflammatory response in adipose tissue is thought to play a critical role in the development of insulin resistance and the progression of metabolic diseases like obesity and diabetes. The chronic low-grade inflammation associated with obesity impairs the normal function of insulin, which is essential for regulating blood glucose levels[11, 12]. This dysfunction exacerbates metabolic imbalances and contributes to the clinical manifestations of T2D. Thus, adipose tissue inflammation has emerged as a key contributor to insulin resistance, highlighting its importance as a potential target for therapeutic intervention[13, 14]. Recent research has focused on understanding the mechanisms underlying adipose tissue inflammation and exploring strategies to mitigate this inflammatory response, with the aim of improving insulin sensitivity and reducing the risk of obesity-related complications.

Among the various therapeutic approaches, plant-derived bioactive compounds have gained considerable attention due to their potential to modulate inflammation and improve metabolic health. Plant extracts rich in

polyphenols, flavonoids, terpenoids, and other bioactive molecules have demonstrated anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and metabolic-regulating properties[15, 16]. These plant-derived bioactives can influence multiple cellular pathways involved in inflammation, oxidative stress, and insulin signaling. For instance, certain plant compounds have been shown to reduce the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines in adipose tissue, thereby alleviating the inflammatory burden that contributes to insulin resistance[17, 18]. Additionally, many of these bioactives possess antioxidant properties that help counteract the oxidative stress associated with metabolic disorders, further supporting their role in improving metabolic health [19]. Given the growing interest in natural products, this review aims to explore the therapeutic potential of plant-derived bioactives in mitigating adipose tissue inflammation. By examining the underlying mechanisms of action, such as the modulation of inflammatory pathways and the reduction of oxidative stress, this review will highlight how these bioactive compounds may offer an effective strategy for preventing or managing obesity and diabetes. Through a better understanding of the molecular interactions and effects of plant extracts, it is hoped that novel, plant-based interventions can be developed to complement existing treatments for obesity and T2D, offering a holistic approach to managing these chronic conditions.

Adipose Tissue Inflammation in Obesity and Diabetes

Adipose tissue inflammation is a key feature of obesity and plays a critical role in the development of insulin resistance[20]. Under normal conditions, adipocytes (fat cells) release adipokines, which are signaling molecules that regulate various aspects of metabolism. However, in obese individuals, excessive fat accumulation leads to the expansion of adipocytes and a state of "adipocyte stress," which triggers the recruitment of immune cells, particularly macrophages, into the tissue[21, 22]. These infiltrating macrophages secrete inflammatory cytokines, such as TNF-α, IL-6, and MCP-1, which activate downstream signaling pathways, including the NF-κB pathway, and inhibit insulin signaling in adipocytes and other tissues.[3]

The inflammation within adipose tissue also leads to alterations in the adipokine profile, with increased levels of pro-inflammatory adipokines (e.g., resistin, TNF-α) and decreased levels of anti-inflammatory adipokines (e.g., adiponectin)[23]. This imbalance promotes insulin resistance and exacerbates metabolic dysfunction. Furthermore, adipose tissue inflammation has systemic effects, contributing to the development of other complications associated with obesity and diabetes, such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and dyslipidemia.

Plant Bioactives and Their Anti-Inflammatory Potential

Plant bioactives, including polyphenols, flavonoids, terpenoids, alkaloids, and carotenoids, have been studied extensively for their anti-inflammatory effects in various tissues, including adipose tissue. These compounds exhibit diverse mechanisms of action that can modulate inflammation, oxidative stress, and insulin sensitivity. Below, we discuss some of the key bioactives and their effects on adipose tissue inflammation.

Polyphenols: Polyphenols, which are abundant in fruits, vegetables, tea, and wine, are well-documented for their antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects[24, 25]. These bioactive compounds, particularly flavonoids like quercetin, catechins, and epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG), play a pivotal role in reducing inflammation in adipose tissue. Their anti-inflammatory action involves the inhibition of key inflammatory pathways, including NF-κB (nuclear factor kappa-light-chain-enhancer of activated B cells) and JNK (c-Jun N-terminal kinase), which are typically activated during chronic inflammation[26, 27]. By suppressing these pathways, polyphenols reduce the secretion of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α (tumor necrosis factor-alpha) and IL-6 (interleukin-6), which are often elevated in obesity and insulin resistance[28]. Moreover, polyphenols can enhance insulin sensitivity in adipose tissue, partly by promoting insulin receptor signaling. They also help upregulate genes that are involved in glucose and lipid metabolism, thus improving overall metabolic health. The ability of polyphenols to mitigate oxidative stress further supports their role in regulating inflammation, making them valuable in managing conditions like obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases, where adipose tissue inflammation is a major concern.

Flavonoids: Flavonoids, a subclass of polyphenols found in a wide range of fruits, vegetables, herbs, and beverages like tea and wine, have emerged as key bioactives with anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties[29, 30]. Some of the most researched flavonoids in relation to adipose tissue inflammation include quercetin, kaempferol, and apigenin. These flavonoids exert their effects by inhibiting the expression of pro-inflammatory cytokines, which are typically elevated in the inflamed adipose tissue of individuals with obesity and metabolic disorders. They also limit macrophage infiltration into adipose tissue, a process that exacerbates local inflammation[31, 32]. In addition to reducing inflammation, flavonoids enhance adipocyte function by promoting the secretion of adiponectin, a hormone with anti-inflammatory and insulin-sensitizing effects. By boosting adiponectin levels, flavonoids help improve insulin sensitivity, which is crucial in the context of obesity and type 2 diabetes. Furthermore, flavonoids can also enhance the antioxidant defense systems in adipocytes, reducing oxidative stress and further protecting the tissue from inflammatory damage. Overall, flavonoids represent a promising group of compounds for managing obesity-induced inflammation and improving metabolic health.

Alkaloids: Alkaloids, naturally occurring compounds found in many plant species, are well-known for their potent anti-inflammatory and metabolic effects[11, 33]. One of the most extensively studied alkaloids is berberine, derived from the root of *Berberis vulgaris* and other medicinal plants. Berberine has demonstrated significant anti-inflammatory activity, particularly in adipose tissue, by inhibiting the NF-κB signaling pathway[34, 35]. This inhibition reduces the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines, such as TNF-α and IL-6, which are often elevated in states of obesity and insulin resistance. In addition to its anti-inflammatory effects, berberine also promotes metabolic improvements by enhancing glucose metabolism and improving insulin sensitivity. One of the key mechanisms through which berberine exerts its effects is the activation of AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK), a crucial regulator of cellular energy homeostasis. AMPK activation improves mitochondrial function, enhances fat oxidation, and reduces adiposity, further benefiting individuals with metabolic disorders like type 2 diabetes and obesity[34, 36]. Thus, alkaloids such as berberine represent promising therapeutic agents for addressing both inflammation and metabolic dysfunction.

Terpenoids: Terpenoids, a diverse class of compounds found in various plants, have demonstrated substantial anti-inflammatory properties, particularly in adipose tissue[37, 38]. Among the most studied terpenoids are curcumin, derived from *Curcuma longa* (turmeric), and ginsenosides, which are bioactive compounds in *Panax ginseng*. Curcumin has long been known for its potent anti-inflammatory effects, primarily through the inhibition of NF-κB activation. This results in a reduction in the expression of pro-inflammatory cytokines in adipose tissue, thus alleviating chronic inflammation. Ginsenosides, another important class of terpenoids, have been shown to modulate macrophage polarization within adipose tissue[39]. This process involves shifting macrophages from a pro-inflammatory M1 phenotype, which exacerbates inflammation, to an anti-inflammatory M2 phenotype, which helps resolve inflammation and improve insulin sensitivity. Both curcumin and ginsenosides have been shown to enhance insulin sensitivity, making them beneficial in managing obesity and metabolic disorders[40, 41]. These terpenoids also possess antioxidant properties, which further protect adipose tissue from oxidative stress, thus contributing to a healthier metabolic profile and reduced inflammation. Consequently, terpenoids offer therapeutic potential for modulating adipose tissue inflammation and improving metabolic health.

Carotenoids: Carotenoids, a group of plant pigments known for their vibrant colors, exhibit powerful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects[42]. Common carotenoids like β-carotene, lutein, and zeaxanthin have been shown to reduce the secretion of pro-inflammatory cytokines from adipocytes, cells that store fat in adipose tissue. These cytokines are often elevated in obesity and contribute to chronic low-grade inflammation[43]. By reducing their production, carotenoids help modulate the inflammatory environment in adipose tissue. Additionally, carotenoids play a critical role in reducing oxidative stress, which is another key contributor to inflammation and metabolic dysfunction. These compounds scavenge free radicals, protecting adipocytes from oxidative damage and improving the overall health of adipose tissue. Furthermore, carotenoids influence adipocyte differentiation and function, promoting a healthier adipose tissue phenotype that is less prone to inflammation[44]. The ability of carotenoids to regulate lipid metabolism and enhance insulin sensitivity makes them valuable in managing obesity, diabetes, and other metabolic disorders. Their multifaceted role in reducing inflammation and promoting metabolic health underscores their potential as dietary interventions for improving adipose tissue function and metabolic homeostasis.

Molecular Mechanisms of Action

The anti-inflammatory effects of plant bioactives in adipose tissue are mediated through a variety of molecular pathways that collectively help to reduce chronic inflammation, a key factor in metabolic diseases such as obesity and type 2 diabetes[45,47,48,49,50]. One of the central mechanisms through which plant bioactives exert their anti-inflammatory effects is by inhibiting the NF-κB (nuclear factor kappa B) pathway. The NF-κB pathway is a major regulator of the immune response and inflammation, and its activation is often linked to the progression of chronic inflammatory diseases[51,52,53,54,55]. Many plant-derived bioactive compounds, including polyphenols, flavonoids, and terpenoids, have been shown to inhibit the activation of this pathway, thereby reducing the inflammatory response within adipose tissue.

Another crucial pathway through which plant bioactive compounds reduce inflammation is by activating AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK)[56,57,58,59,60]. AMPK is an important energy-sensing enzyme that plays a key role in regulating cellular metabolism and maintaining energy homeostasis. Activation of AMPK has been shown to improve insulin sensitivity, which is often impaired in obesity and metabolic disorders. Furthermore, AMPK activation inhibits the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α, interleukin-6 (IL-6), and other mediators of inflammation [61,62,63,64,65,66]. Compounds like berberine, a plant-derived alkaloid, are particularly effective in activating AMPK, leading to reduced inflammation in adipose tissue and improved metabolic outcomes. In addition to modulating inflammatory signaling pathways, plant bioactives can also influence the polarization of macrophages in adipose tissue. Macrophages, which are immune cells, play a critical role in the inflammatory environment of adipose tissue. Under conditions of obesity, macrophages tend to adopt a pro-inflammatory M1 phenotype, contributing to the development of chronic inflammation[48]. However,

plant bioactives can shift the macrophage population from the pro-inflammatory M1 phenotype to the anti-inflammatory M2 phenotype. This shift helps to resolve inflammation and promotes tissue repair, further alleviating the inflammatory burden in adipose tissue[63,64,65,66,67,68]. Moreover, plant bioactives have been found to modulate adipokine secretion, which plays an important role in regulating inflammation within adipose tissue. Bioactive plant compounds can enhance the secretion of anti-inflammatory adipokines, such as adiponectin, which has been shown to exert beneficial effects on insulin sensitivity and inflammation. At the same time, these bioactives can reduce the levels of pro-inflammatory adipokines, such as resistin and TNF-α, which are elevated in conditions of obesity and contribute to systemic inflammation[49, 50]. Collectively, these mechanisms highlight the potential of plant bioactives in mitigating inflammation and improving metabolic health by targeting key molecular pathways in adipose tissue.

Clinical Implications and Future Directions

While preclinical studies have demonstrated the efficacy of plant bioactives in reducing adipose tissue inflammation and improving insulin sensitivity, clinical evidence remains limited. More robust clinical trials are needed to validate the therapeutic potential of plant-derived compounds in obesity and diabetes management. Additionally, the bioavailability, optimal dosages, and long-term safety of these plant bioactives require further investigation. Future research should also focus on identifying synergistic effects of plant extracts and exploring their potential in combination with conventional therapies for enhanced therapeutic outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Adipose tissue inflammation is a central mechanism in the pathogenesis of obesity and diabetes. Targeting this inflammation with plant-derived bioactives holds significant promise as a natural, safe, and effective therapeutic strategy. Polyphenols, flavonoids, alkaloids, terpenoids, and carotenoids possess potent anti-inflammatory properties that can reduce chronic inflammation in adipose tissue, improve insulin sensitivity, and restore metabolic balance. Further clinical research is essential to translate these findings into practical treatments for obesity and diabetes.

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